

EXCERPT



When Narcissism Comes to Church *Healing Your Community from Emotional and Spiritual Abuse*

March 17, 2020 | \$22, 208 pages, hardcover | 978-0-8308-4159-2

Chuck DeGroat has been counseling pastors with Narcissistic Personality Disorder, as well as those wounded by narcissistic leaders, for over twenty years. Offering compassion and hope for both narcissists themselves and those affected by its destructive power, DeGroat takes a close look at this insidious issue and imparts wise counsel for churches looking to heal from its systemic effects.

Why Does Narcissism Seem to Thrive in Churches?

The beloved priest-psychologist Henri Nouwen wasn't trying to define narcissism, but he might as well have been, when he wrote:

The long painful history of the Church is the history of people ever and again tempted to choose power over love, control over the cross, being a leader over being led. Those who resisted this temptation to the end and thereby give us hope are the true saints. One thing is clear to me: the temptation of power is greatest when intimacy is a threat. Much Christian leadership is exercised by people who do not know how to develop healthy, intimate relationships and have opted for power and control instead. Many Christian empire-builders have been people unable to give and receive love.

This sad abandonment of the humble way of Jesus shows up today in pastors of large and small churches, in beloved Christian celebrities, prolific clergy authors and bloggers, dynamic church planters, and seemingly godly men and women. The frightening reality of narcissism is that it often presents in a compelling package. Narcissism is the "glittering image" we present to the world, as novelist Susan Howatch describes it in her novel *Glittering Images*, which tells the story of a mid-twentieth century clergy narcissist. Could it be that the very men and women who are called to be shepherds of the flock struggle most with narcissism?

Sadly, narcissism in the clergy is under studied. When I did my doctoral work over a decade ago, I discovered vast resources on pastoral wellbeing, including studies on burnout, addiction, and depression. I found popular articles on narcissistic leadership but an absence of studies on the prevalence of narcissism. I had a sense that we didn't want the world to know our dirty little secret. When I started doing psychological assessments for pastors and church planters, I saw that narcissistic traits were often presented as strengths. Narcissism can be interpreted as confidence, strong leadership, clear vision, a thick skin.

A colleague of mine often says that ministry is a magnet for a narcissistic personality—who else would want to speak on behalf of God every week? While the vast majority of people struggle with public speaking, not only do pastors do it regularly, but they do it with "divine authority." In my own work, which includes fifteen years of psychological testing among pastors, the vast majority of ministerial candidates test on the spectrum of Cluster B DSM-V personality disorders, which feature narcissistic traits most prominently. The rates are even higher among church planters.

Elevations on the narcissistic spectrum are coupled with testimonies that include fear of major failure (often moral failure), profound shame, and secret addictions. Hidden in the heart of these shepherds is profound shame. Power keeps the shame and fear at bay—at least for some time. The narcissistic mask is an armor of self-protection which both defends the fragile self within, but offends, oppresses, and alienates the other.

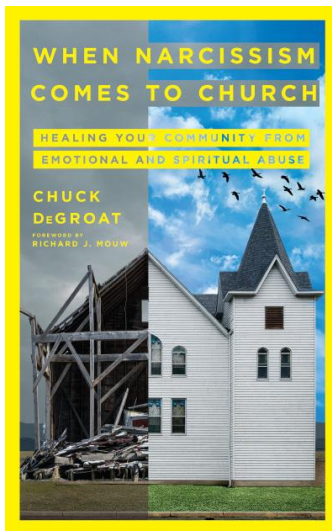


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Narcissist pastors are anxious and insecure shepherds who do not lead the sheep to still waters but into hurricane winds. I've attended and spoken at dozens of pastor's conferences, and I see this anxiety abuzz in the comparison and competition, the showmanship and dress, the addictions to substances and fitness and social media and approval. I hear it in the anxious voice of a young pastor who was recently contacted by a literary agent and proudly proclaimed, "It's my time. Now I launch!" I feel it in the inauthenticity of a prospective church planter whose overly optimistic answers to my sincere queries about his health leave me wondering whether he's ever been honest with anyone. I sense it in the endless selfie posts of a trendy clergywoman whose daily social media displays seem to be a cry of "notice me." I see it in the veteran pastor who deems himself wise and enlightened and speaks with condescension to young staff members.

In my lifetime, the classic image of the devoted parish pastor who could be trusted to rightly preach the word, diligently care for souls, and wisely lead the church has shifted dramatically. With major scandals in both Protestant and Catholic churches, trust in clergy is down significantly over the last twenty years. Clergy trust has "dropped steadily since 2009, down from a high of 67 percent in 1985, the pollster reported. Pastors are now seen as less trustworthy than judges (43%), day care providers (46%), police officers (56%), pharmacists (62%), medical doctors (65%), grade school teachers (66%), military officers (71%), and nurses (82%)."

Seminaries tasked with training the next generation of ordained clergy are also in decline. Amidst scandals ranging from televangelists to Catholic priests to megachurch superstars, the pastorate is no longer seen as a noble vocation as it once was. Given this general decline, there is even greater pressure for those pursuing ministry to be good enough, smart enough, winsome enough, inspiring enough, and confident enough to bring revitalization, start new churches, and draw the dechurched back. The vocation of parish pastor is not as sexy as it once was.

Interestingly, in my earliest years in ministry serving as a hybrid pastor-therapist, I was often asked to write references for prospective planters. My warnings about their narcissism were often read as recommendations of their gifts to inspire, their quick wit, strong leadership, charisma, charm, and influence. In retrospect, I see the damage done by those deemed ready to lead and plant churches. In too many post-denominational ministry networks today, where traditional ordination processes have been abandoned, young leaders are snatched up and deployed without proper training or soul formation, simply because they've been successful in other arenas.

We've not yet learned. But as stories of damaging narcissism increase, and as social media serves as an amplifier for victim's voices, we may be approaching a reckoning.

—Taken from chapter one, "When Narcissism Comes to Church"

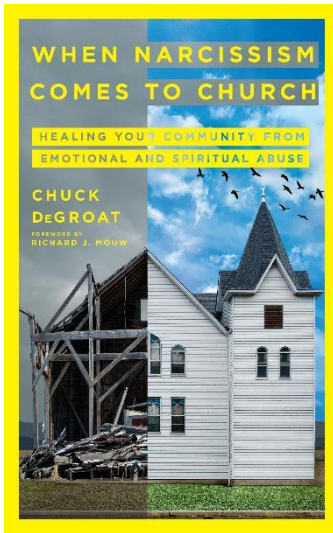


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Diagnosing and Treating Souls of Narcissistic Leaders

“For far too long the evangelical church in America has nurtured and supported narcissism in our leadership. The addiction to platforms, influence, new ideas, as well as unbiblical definitions of leadership, authority, and power has sustained a structure that dehumanizes our leaders and exploits God’s people. *When Narcissism Comes to Church* is an important book in a season when we must ask deeper questions of the very structure, metrics, motivations, and means to the work we set out to do in the name of Christ. Dr. DeGroat does not merely point a finger at narcissistic leaders, but asks us to consider these individuals in our church as fruit of a more fundamental problem in the American church. May we have ears to hear, humility to repent, and courage to respond.”

—Dennae Pierre, director of City to City North America, Surge Network leadership team

“Hiring (marrying, working with or for, being pastored by) a narcissist is like building a home in an alluvial plain. The ground is gorgeous but in due season the flood will devour all you have worked so hard to create. Chuck DeGroat pierces the glittering image of narcissism and brilliantly exposes the inner workings of an empty, shame-filled heart and the devastating consequences of Christians being so drawn to narcissists in the church and in politics. This is a landmark work, full of wisdom, tenderness, honor, and hope. If we want to offer a narcissistic culture hope in the gospel, we must tend to the narcissism deeply embedded in our own believing community. This is a profound call for a radical culture shift—truly a must-read.”

—Dan B. Allender, professor of counseling psychology and founding president of the Seattle School of Theology and Psychology, author of *The Wounded Heart and Healing the Wounded Heart*

“In the work of the soul, we name things to tame things. And there is nothing that is more in need of taming than the rampant narcissism that is not just a part of our cultural landscape but is hiding in plain sight in my own life. With *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, Chuck DeGroat unflinchingly names the subject for the leviathan it is, while offering hope in real, embodied stories of redemption. Comprehensive in scope, accessible in application, and generously kind in spirit, this book will provide pastor and laity alike the wisdom and courage that is necessary for the healing and recommissioning of the church’s soul for years to come.”

—Curt Thompson, psychiatrist, author of *The Soul of Shame* and *Anatomy of the Soul*

“If you wonder why family and friends have left the church or why you often feel more lost than found when you step into the sanctuary, this book is for you. Whether you’re the pastor or the parishioner, Chuck DeGroat, asks the stark-raving honest questions about church and church leadership that most of us are afraid to voice, even though they simmer in our hearts and leave us hot with confusion and emptiness. This book will not challenge you to pick up stones and throw them through stained-glass windows, but it will engage you to look within and find your true North Star to follow through the

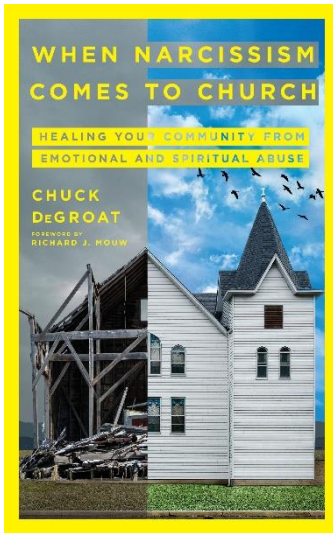


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wilderness of church to an authentic spirituality of living, serving, worshipping, inviting, and communing in love tethered to something far greater than our small denominations, building programs, or evangelism crusades—to Someone far greater than ourselves.”

—Sharon A. Hersh, therapist and author of *The Last Addiction: Why Self-Help is Not*

“Why are we just beginning to talk about narcissism in our spiritual leaders? Chuck DeGroat believes it is because we have been rewarding it in our churches. He is powerfully and painfully right! More than just calling out narcissism, DeGroat skillfully unpacks how it shows up in leaders of large and small churches, beloved Christian celebrities, and seemingly godly men and women. *When Narcissism Comes to Church* peels back the layers, ever so carefully on our ‘real selves.’”

—Dan White Jr., author of *Love Over Fear*, cofounder of the Praxis Gathering

“If you, like so many, have been lured in by the shiny veneer of narcissism only to be left shattered, confused, and filled with shame, you will find help in these pages. In *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, Chuck DeGroat nimbly pulls back the veil—exposing the many faces of narcissism and helping us see what lies underneath. Drawing on decades of experience, DeGroat writes with honesty, wisdom, and compassion, providing help for the wounded and hope for the church.”

—Alison Cook, therapist and coauthor of *Boundaries for Your Soul*

“A book on this topic is desperately needed right now. But more than that, we need a deeply thoughtful treatise on this subject that also points a healthy way forward. This is that book.”

—Nancy Ortberg, CEO of Transforming the Bay with Christ

“*When Narcissism Comes to Church* proves what many of us have known for years—that Chuck DeGroat is a skilled surgeon of the soul. His newest book—twenty years in the making—is the definitive ‘surgical text’ for diagnosing and treating the soul of narcissistic leaders. Layer upon layer, he deftly reveals how narcissism develops, why it’s so prevalent in church leadership, and how it traumatizes church communities. The greatest gift of this book, however, is that as DeGroat skillfully exposes the primal wound far below the surface of narcissism, he gently helps each one of us see the pain and wounding in our own soul. Not since Henri Nouwen’s classic book *The Wounded Healer* have I encountered such an essential book on leadership.”

—Michael John Cusick, founder and CEO of Restoring the Soul, author of *Surfing for God*



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